



Chengtu School

Photo courtesy of Barry Mahorney.

## West Szechwan Mission (1919–1951)

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### MILTON HOOK

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The West Szechwan Mission ( ; West Sichuan Mission) started in 1919 as a subdivision of the West China Union Mission. The provincial capital of Chengtu ( Chengdu), a Buddhist stronghold, became the headquarters for mission activities.<sup>1</sup> The vast area is an elevated plain walled in on all sides by imposing mountains and enjoys a temperate climate.<sup>2</sup> Church leadership apportioned the mountains to the west to the Tibetan Mission and those to the south to the Yunnan Mission.

The superintendent of the West China Mission, Merritt C. Warren ( ), accompanied Claude Blandford ( ) on an exploratory trip to Chengdu in September/October 1917. They identified suitable rental premises for a pioneer missionary family.<sup>3</sup> Claude and Ida Blandford then began their endeavors at Chengdu almost immediately. A handful of believers already in the city formed the nucleus for evangelistic services.<sup>4</sup> A national evangelist assisted in the initial stages but had to withdraw for health reasons.<sup>5</sup> The most successful method of evangelism was found to be a prolonged Bible school for instruction in basic Christianity. Two literature evangelists were also active in the city. By mid-1919 a little church community organised with 13 baptised members<sup>6</sup>

Some progress took place in 1920 despite civil unrest in the region. Church membership rose to 22, and an out-station opened. An elementary school began with an enrolment of 62 pupils.<sup>7</sup> Eight looms purchased to weave cotton towels enabled the older students to earn their fees and became skilled in a trade.<sup>8</sup> Ida Blandford taught some of the classes in the elementary school and nurtured the Sabbath Schools, but disaster struck when she contracted pneumonia and meningitis. She passed away on May 5, 1922, and was laid to rest in a little cemetery for expatriates outside the city.<sup>9</sup>

Sidney Lindt ( ) had arrived in Chengdu as the secretary/treasurer of the mission.<sup>10</sup> He became the caretaker leader in 1923 while Blandford took a furlough in America.<sup>11</sup> Blandford married Lillian Thompson, a nurse at the New England Sanitarium in Massachusetts,<sup>12</sup> and they arrived back at Chengdu in August 1924.<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately, Lillian began to suffer ill health soon after the start of her mission term. By mid-1926 it became necessary for Alton Hughes ( ) to assume leadership in West Szechwan.<sup>14</sup>

Recurrent civil unrest forced Alton and Emma Hughes to temporarily withdraw from Chengdu in 1927, and they did not return until about May 1928.<sup>15</sup> Despite the troubles, all reports noted progress. The baptized membership rose to 115 individuals. The mission organized a second church and established seven out-stations.<sup>16</sup> At Da Chi Gou (Dazigou), east of Chengdu, an Adventist elementary school with 20 students was run.<sup>17</sup>

Fourteen nationals consisting of evangelists, teachers, and colporteurs completed the mission team who worked among an estimated population of 30 million people.<sup>18</sup>

During the 1930s progress was unremarkable. The number of organized churches rose to four. Baptized membership statistics showed an increase from 112 in December 1932<sup>19</sup> to 236 in 1939.<sup>20</sup> Most of the Second World War years were characterized by faithful national leadership doing their best to nurture the membership and advance the cause in the absence of expatriate direction and finances.<sup>21</sup>

After the war public evangelistic crusades took place in several provincial centers to inject fresh life into the congregations. The school at Chengdu expanded to include the academy level.<sup>22</sup> Such positive momentum was brief, because communist forces gradually overran the country and made it difficult for Christian missions to function properly. Carl Currie ( ) and family had arrived at Chengdu in 1946 to take the leadership, but late in 1948 emergency plans transferred expatriates to safer areas. Currie went to Formosa (Taiwan).<sup>23</sup> His assistant, Djan Tieh Nung ( ), continued with evangelism throughout 1948 and baptized about 50 new converts.<sup>24</sup>

When the communist government took power in 1949, church officials selected nationals to assume leadership at all levels.<sup>25</sup> Communication channels giving details of the West Szechwan Mission saga, like all other missions in mainland China, soon closed. The 1952 *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* finally acknowledged that political circumstances made it impossible to accurately report any more mission activities in China.<sup>26</sup>

## Directors of the West Szechwan Mission

Claude L. Blandford ( ) 1919-1926; Alton C. Hughes ( ) 1926-1932; Charles A. Woolsey 1932-1933; Alexander B. Buzzell ( ) 1933-1939; Cecil B. Guild ( ) 1940-1942; Chiang Tsung Kuan 1943- 1945; Giang Tsung Kwang ( ) 1945-1946; Holman Carl Currie ( ) 1946-1948; Djan Tieh Nung ( ShanTieh Nung) 1949-1951.

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